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Belgium and the War

A SERMON

BY THE

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BELGIUM AND THE WAR

*“They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain:
For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the
Lord, as the waters cover the sea.” Isaiah 11:9.*

In Byron's day, Italy, with her bleeding heart under the heel of the conqueror and her fairest provinces torn from her helpless hands, was the “Niobe of nations”—so Byron called her, seeing her weeping like the Theban queen, though turned to stone by an angry God, for her slaughtered children.

Today Belgium is the “Niobe of nations.” Early this summer there were living in Belgium seven million and a half of the most contented people in Europe. Few of them were millionaires; few of them had what we call “wealth” in America; but they were all industrious and economical and earning each day their daily bread, with prayer, and looking fearlessly into the future.

Today the population of Belgium is a scant three millions. All these last weeks and months every avenue of egress and exit, by land or by sea, has been thronged and choked by masses of men, women and children hurrying into Holland, France or England.

One-third of these remaining three millions are paupers. There are large numbers of people everywhere in Europe, as well as in Belgium, who are living from hand to mouth, but with perfect satisfaction to themselves. Many of these Belgians had, as their entire possessions, a little plot of ground, often less than an acre, or a little shop, and, when ejected from the ground or shop, they were driven from what they looked upon as an earthly paradise, and into pauperism as loathsome to them as it would be to us—pauperism so deep, despairing, and hopeless that you and I, perhaps, have never seen the like of it.

All this might have been prevented by a scrap of paper with the King's signature upon it, or by a nod of the King's head or a wave of his hand. But these petty farmers, merchants and shopkeepers sided with their sovereign and were ready to lay their country and themselves on the altar of the Ideal. They refused, with all the consequences before their eyes, to join in a war in which they had no more interest than we. They threw their little band of soldiers against the most highly trained army, "the best fighting machine," it has been called, in Europe, making a marvelous and altogether incomprehensible resistance.

Driven slowly back, the Belgians saw their fields devastated, their cities like Termonde, Alost, and Dinant, burned; their university town of Louvain, with its beautiful cathedral, destroyed. They saw their capital, Brussels, often compared with Paris, occupied by foreign troops, and their great commercial city, Antwerp, not only occupied, but placed with Brussels under an exhausting and seemingly impossible tribute.

If this be war, as we are told; if any army—if every army—under like circumstances must commit such deeds as were thought possible only in the dark ages, then war is as subversive of civilization as it is of Christianity.

This little kingdom of Belgium has been the shuttle-cock and football of Europe, knocked and kicked hither and yon from the time when all there was of it was a semi-civilized tribe called the Belgae inhabiting its marshes and forests. To this tribe belonged one of those famous “three parts” into which Cæsar said “all Gaul is divided.” And Cæsar did his very best to compel those three parts to become a single Roman province. But those few savage Belgians had no more hesitation in resisting Cæsar’s legions than their descendants had in resisting “the best fighting troops in the world.” Ever since Cæsar’s day Belgium has been the battlefield of Europe, the “Bowl” in which kings and emperors have struggled for the goal of continental or universal supremacy. Whoever conquered, Belgium lost and was tossed with the rest of the loot to the victor. She belonged in rapid succession to Austria, to France, to Spain, and to Holland.

Not only did Julius Cæsar fight his first recorded battle in Belgium, but there also King Clovis met and conquered his foes. There the Saracens, it is said, were hurrying when the blow of Charles Martel’s hammer near Poitiers staggered and stopped them. There, most terrible of all the events in Belgium’s tragic history till the wave of this war swept over her, came an army of the cruellest soldiers, as they were reputed, in Europe, under the leadership of the Duke of Alva. To speak Alva’s name today in the ears of

Belgians or of Hollanders is to bring up before the eyes of those who hear a vision of a monster of inhumanity.

In a single year, it is said, 75,000 persons were put to death by Alva and his soldiers. For the most part they were non-combatants and the only crime that was charged against them was that they were patriotic, or that they were Protestants, or that they were possessed of treasure desired by Alva or his minions.

In 1568 Antwerp was called the wealthiest city in Europe. She possessed at least 500 marble mansions, for the records prove that in that year 500 mansions of marble were destroyed in the so-called "Spanish Fury." You may read the story of it in "The Rise of the Dutch Republic," by our own Motley, but if you have not a heart of iron you cannot read it without tears.

For three days the city was sacked by Spanish soldiers, who were given full license to do as they liked with the persons and the property of the inhabitants. That 8,000 men, women and children were massacred in those three days is the least terrible part of the story. From the infant just born to the octogenarian, without discrimination of sex, all alike suffered inconceivable and unspeakable tortures in this debauch of demons. The pavements of the churches, to which crowds had fled for safety, were piled high with corpses and the narrow streets were impassable with the wounded, the dying and the dead. Compared with the devastation wrought in this pandemonium, all that happened in two invasions by the emissaries of Louis XIV, and in the English invasion of Marlborough, the emissary of Queen Anne and the despotic Sarah Churchill and the

final desperate and despairing struggle of Napoleon at Waterloo but a few miles from Brussels for the throne of the world, were of trifling importance.

The prosperity of modern Belgium, since her neutrality was guaranteed in 1839 by England, France, Austria, Russia and Prussia, is not by any means due to the extent of her territory, for Belgium is only a little triangle between France, Germany, Holland and the sea. That triangle is but 165 miles long and 120 miles broad, containing 11,400 square miles. It is about the same size as two of our rather diminutive States, Rhode Island and Connecticut, with a fair-sized State like Massachusetts thrown in.

Belgium has, it is true, 900,000 square miles of territory in the Congo, but, at present, they are almost negligible. Neither has Belgium enormous mineral wealth like our Nevada, Colorado and California. She has a belt of coal and iron coming up out of northwestern France, which gives her a value altogether disproportionate to her size. For coal and iron in Europe will soon be seemingly of greater value than silver and gold, for you cannot make cannon or warships out of the so-called "precious metals." This iron of Belgium is the "hematite" or blood-red iron, and is considered essential for fine tools and weapons of war.

But Belgium's real wealth comes, not out of the bowels of the earth, but from the surface, from her Lilliputian farms.

We have in our northwest what we call wheat lands; great plains, boundless, shimmering under the sun, palpitating with the heat of the long summer, and from those plains our farmers succeed in raising, on the average, fif-

teen bushels to the acre. The Belgians, with their little holdings, raise twice that, and then seven extra bushels tossed in for good measure. With Belgium's productivity our single State of Texas could find place and provisions for the whole population of Europe, and all our States together, if equally well cultivated, could support the entire population of the planet. The Belgians are not the most highly educated people in Europe, but they were the first to have public schools, though these schools were intended almost entirely for boys.

It means very much to Belgium that, in her picturesque and musty town of Ghent, the greatest of Spanish kings and German emperors, Charles V, was born. But it means a great deal more to us Americans that on the 24th of December, 1814, in that same town of Ghent, a treaty of peace was signed between the United States and Great Britain. More significant still, that treaty has been kept to this hour. It is not necessarily true that treaties are made only to be broken in a great crisis. Wherever the high contracting parties take as their cry, not "dominion or death," but the slogan of the French Republic reversed—not "liberty, equality, fraternity"—but "fraternity, equality, liberty"—then solemn promises, though made by nations, will be solemnly observed.

Well would it be for these warring potentates of Europe if they might, on the 24th day of this December, journey to that sleepy little town of Ghent, "where it is always afternoon," and, standing together before that house in which Charles V was born, recall his life, with its unrivaled power, pomp, splendor, and remember that there came a

day when, possessing all that they are fighting for and more, he laid down the mightiest scepter a human hand ever held for the staff of a penitent monk. "So passes away the glory of the world."

While the Belgians are proud of Charles V, they are not nearly so proud of him as conqueror or penitent monk as they are of their painter, Rubens. Rubens, it is true, was not born in Belgium, but he spent most of his life in Antwerp and did his best work there. His two greatest pictures, "The Elevation on the Cross" and "The Descent from the Cross," are hanging, or were hanging till a few weeks ago, in the Antwerp Cathedral.

Out of a dispute over a plot of ground came the first of these paintings. Surely there has been no plot of ground in Belgium, or in all Europe, that has been more productive. No quarrel before or since has resulted in so much good to the world.

Symbolic to Belgian eyes must "The Elevation on the Cross" have seemed during these weeks in which Belgium, herself, was being lifted up upon the cross of sorrow by hands as hard as those of the Roman soldiers. But if Belgium should ever come to see that as Jesus, our Lord, hung upon His cross that He might conquer the enmity of man, and beat down forever that great serpent, Satan, beneath his feet—so she, by her sorrows, has had a part in putting an end to strife between nations, then, indeed, may she feel that some, at least, of her griefs have been gains. All persons or peoples who go to the cross rather than surrender truth and righteousness and honor are crucified with Christ.

Intensely as we disapprove of the treatment that the Congo Free States were reported—doubtless with too much truth—to have received at the hands of Leopold II, we are not prepared to believe that because the people of the Congo were tortured by a luxurious and lecherous king to increase revenues which he squandered on his favorites—that therefore the innocent people of Belgium, many of whom have never even heard of the Congo, are being crushed beneath the horrors of this war.

That would be a kind of rudimentary justice which satisfies the heart of a savage and the hearts of some who are semi-civilized as well. But it was against just that sort of justice that our Lord made his protest. When the Pharisees came to Jesus and said, "Who did sin?" as they pointed to the blind man, they were not thinking of hygienic, but of ethical sin, of transgression of God's holy law. "Who did sin, this man or his parents?"—"somebody must have sinned, for this is plainly the penalty." And Jesus said, "Nobody; this is an act of God and you are not ready yet for the full explanation of it." "Thou knowest not now; thou shalt know hereafter." So, too, when they came to Him and asked about the eighteen men who were trapped under the falling stones and timbers of the tower of Siloam, what particular sin they had committed, Jesus made the same reply. They were sinners, of course, as all men are, but they were not particular sinners who needed to be particularly punished in just that particular way.

Unless a man has the inspiration of the old Hebrew prophets, he dare not say that Belgium is suffering

now for the sins of Leopold II. But you and I can say that Belgium is suffering for her situation. Neither would we dare say that England is suffering because there have been Englishmen who may have made large fortunes by the sale of opium; or that France is suffering because there may have been Frenchmen who ground down the natives of Madagascar for gold; or that Germany is suffering because there may have been Germans who have enslaved both white men and black men in order to grow rich rapidly. But they are all suffering the agonies of this war, because they have all alike, though in varying degrees, refused to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. They are not fighting in Europe tonight because Christianity has failed, but because these warring kings and emperors have failed in living up to the Christianity which they have professed.

Do you believe that, if a decade ago the nations of Europe had adopted the Golden Rule as final, there would be any war in Europe now? Do you believe that if, at the close of this war, they shall honestly and sincerely adopt that Rule as the last word concerning the relation, not only of man to man, but of nation to nation, that there will ever be another war in Europe? Then shall dawn that day the Prophet foresaw "When they shall not hurt nor destroy in all God's holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

Our pity has gone out toward Belgium in a great throb of desire that, so far as possible, we might undo that which has been done. If our hearts have, indeed, been harrowed, then out of the furrow should come not only pity, but

piety. Only piety can protect pity from the winds that level it to the earth and from the sun that scorches and shrivels it. If the pity that you and I have for Belgium meets with piety, if piety and pity blend in our breasts, then shall we find ourselves not only pitying our poor brothers of Belgium, but we shall be moved with a piety which will enable us to pray even for those whose hands are as stained with innocent blood as the hands of the men who elevated the Christ on His cross: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

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